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A FATHER (58) TO HIS SON (8)

Money is necessary primarily to ensure independence. If you have enough for that, you need no more. We are not rich, we are not even well-off, we just manage, but we are independent. We flatter nobody, we ask nothing from anybody, we never hesitate to call a wrong a wrong and a wrong-doer a wrong-doer, however rich or powerful he is. We are able to do this, because we are content to live within our very moderate means and are obliged to no one for anything. It is possible much wealth, great power, will come to you in an honest way, without your doing anything evil or low for it. If that happens, the important thing for a man is the use he makes of these two, not the enjoyment he gets from having them. If the salaaming of a thousand men puff you up, you may be in a great position but you are a small man, and when a small man becomes aware of the real smallness below all the show he puts on—and sooner or later he can't avoid becoming aware of it,—he is indeed a very unhappy man. All the power and wealth of the world cannot keep death away, and when death will come no one can say, though all can be certain the dead can neither take away nor enjoy wealth or power. So you see how silly it is to be envious; I don't say you are now, but you must never be, for who is man envying? Another creature like himself whom death may take away at any moment from all that he is enjoying, on whom life may at any moment inflict pain, suffering, loss, making living itself worse than death. Happiness a man may have in short spans, it just does not go on for ever; but content over a life-time is possible, content while striving one's hardest, doing one's best, always without malice, envy, dishonesty, lying, cheating. For a man who is a man, for a son of our family for instance, there is only one way of living, do right and don't bother about consequences. From that comes the peace of mind that is worth more in real terms than all the treasures of the world. And if you say how shall I know what is right, the answer is don't worry, you will always know when the time comes if your predisposition is towards right. Another thing, never hesitate to look at yourself as you are, don't run away from your faults or pretend they don't exist or are in fact virtues. Even if you can't correct your faults, as happens sometimes, at least be aware of them.-

CREDIT—DEBIT

Gauri Deshpande

AFTER making a beginning by finding out what can be called poetry, essentially, there still remains a difficult and persistent problem, that will not go away on being glared at, redefined, or ignored. That is, how do you tell good poetry from bad? Here, the simple expedient of applying personal taste won't work. It is chastening to find out that poems you have always been fond of may not necessarily be good poems. To illustrate: I am very fond of a poem which is obviously a favourite of anthologists also; Ernest Dowson's "Non Sum Qualis Eram".¹ This is emphatically not a good poem. Of course, I am quite humble enough to admit that I would be pleased with myself were I to write anything as catchy, however, I must admit at aiming rather higher. It is a clever poem; it has style. It is certainly amusing and readable, but it is not a good poem. Now why do I say that? What it does lack that makes me discard it? It lacks, to my mind, the first two absolute essentials of good poetry: truth and seriousness of purpose.

In this context, by truth I do not mean anything as metaphysical as that jesting Pilate mocked at. I mean it merely in the humdrum sense of fact, actual experience, verifiable sensory data, etc. For our purposes, the scope of this truth can be enlarged to accommodate such matters as dreams, myths or visions—provided they are genuinely a part of your experience. The basis of any poem must be this kind of truth. Ernest Dowson in the poem above is not, we feel convinced after the first glamour of its style has worn off, talking about anything that he in truth experienced, whether in his life or imagination. It might have been something he read about,

¹ I would very much like to illustrate from Indian poetry in English, but am afraid, that though all our readers would have read Ezekiel, Das or Katrak, they are unlikely to have at hand the complete works of these poets for ready reference, nor can I assume them to be so familiar with the work as not to need a book to refer to at all. Hence the resort to the ubiquitous *Golden Treasury* (mine has been revised by C. Day Lewis).

translated, constructed out of whole cloth, just to put one on. The lack of the foundation of experience in the poem is conveyed through expression. This, you might say, is the fault of expression and not of the validity of the experience. Maybe. But I would point out that in a finer analysis the words that serve experience, though in danger of being trite, are still not remote and opaque to the point of meaninglessness. Words, in themselves, are admittedly treacherous, for they do not always mean, in the totality of the poem, what each of them does in a dictionary. They exude an aroma, an aura of connotations, often inconsonant to the tone of the poem and ruin it, by exposing its underlying falsity. Any reader, even one unaccustomed to reading and assessing poems will be put off by lines like: "I have forgot much, Cynara! gone with the wind, / Flung roses, roses, riotously with the throng. . . ." The only reaction to that is 'Oh, come on!' The flavour of borrowed metaphor and echoes of previous usage lend an air of such activity and festivity to the images of Dowson, striving to be mournful, that anyone can be excused for not taking him seriously, let alone symbolically. I would really hesitate to put down his failure to an inadequacy of expression, an uncertain grasp over the nuances of the language. Not that I contend that he felt nothing of what he says he did, but only that his feelings were small in truth. By over dramatising them, he has blown them out of existence. A simple, unadorned and truthful sentence like "But I saw/each shadow cast your blurred image into my glass/somehow. . . . (Kamala Das)", is much more convincing than the grand-manner posturing of Dowson's "But when the feast is finished and the lamps expire,/Then falls thy shadow. . . .", which predisposes us to doubt the existence of either the feast, the lamps, the shadow or Cynara herself. In actual life, it is often that you come across this tendency on the part of make-believe to go in for fictitious and minute detail.

THE truth that I would look for, as the least requirement of any poem, good or bad, stylish or awkward, finished or rough, famous or unseen, is this simple, basic foundation in fact. The reason that I admitted above imaginative truth and the like to this category is that any imaginative truth has a basis in fact. No one is likely, outside of esoteric miracles and revelations to imagine anything that has no connection with his or her life. There is, buried deep somewhere in the formidable library of video tapes stored in our memory centres, one piece of actual, experiential information which is the basis of what we may term our wildest dreams or imaginings.² Thus what I posit is this: As I pointed out in my last essay on poetry, poetry must appeal, must touch, must recall

² For this statement I have the support of a whole school of psychiatrists and neurosurgeons, amongst them Berne, Harris and Penfield.

from a reader an actual response of kinship (from his own library of experiential tapes) ; a response that will allow him to feel that he knows what the poet is talking about, even if he cannot follow him as on a point to point map. Now, if the poet himself has no idea or feeling of this sort for what he is talking about, it is unlikely that he will call forth any response from the reader at all. That is, his poem will remain an academic exercise in the poetics and style of his times. What was an accessible emotion in "Daffodils" or even in "Kubla Khan"³ loses itself completely in a poem like "Cynara" and the poem becomes clever word play.

Every poem, in short, to be good, must consist of two kinds of truth ; an individual and a universal. A poem with both present, supporting each other, like the two above, has already won half the battle. A poem with only an individual one, like Shakespeare's Sonnets, would evoke the kind of response I defined, only if the poet is of that calibre, for it is trickier to be good on the strength of individually experienced truth alone ; you may end up being totally obscure, or just plain boring as masses of Pound or the later Wordsworth. But if you come across a poem with only a universal truth in it, it is a safe bet to discard it. I don't even have to cite any examples. Each one of us has seen and even written such : about mother's love, cynical observations on human nature, romantic piffle about true love or 'Nature'. I would not say a poem can make it into the list with only universal truth to support it. The final definition of the kind of truth one must look for in a poem, then, would be : a truth based on factual experience, as close as possible to individual truth, and yet capable of universal comprehension.

COMING after truth, seriousness of purpose does not mean, not at all, the seriousness of the tone of the poem. A poem can be as merry as you like ; what must be serious is its intention to convey what it does. The lackadaisical poet who says, here's what I've said, and be damned to you if you do not understand it, is not to be considered here. For a poem is a communication as well as an expression, and it is the purpose which dominates its former aspect. The intention of the poet reveals his commitment to his truth and to his craft. The poet's intention is the poem's purpose. The seriousness with which it is meant is the invitation to you to take it seriously, understand its truth, and perhaps agree with it.

Before going further, I would like to clear up one point. How does one know a poet's intention if not by what he *says* in a poem ? There is a possibility of a misunderstanding on this score, but it can be minimised

³ A marvellous demonstration of the effect of the video tape library that stores anything, almost without a monitor in our mind, is to be found in the history of this extraordinary poem, as detailed by John Livingston Lowes in his *The Road to Xanadu*.

by referring to the poet's body of work. This, and the times which he inhabits or did inhabit would reveal his major preoccupations. Coming back to Dowson, his times, his style, his bloated refrain, his pretentious images easily warrant the conclusion that he was not interested in portraying the ironical juxtaposition of inward and helpless fidelity with outward debauché. He was interested mainly in turning out a pretty, clever poem. For instance, a known satirist cannot be taken to mean exactly what he says. Who would understand Swift to have been advocating the slaughter of Irish children? Or a predominantly religious writer like Eliot cannot be assumed to have become purely a humorist just because he is writing about a lighthearted subject like cats. And Dowson, a trivial but trendy poet cannot suddenly assume grandeur because he uses pompous phrases.

Before leaving the unfortunate Dowson, I must admit, however, that a measure of injustice has been done to him in my edition of the *Golden Treasury*, in as much as, his poor poem has been printed immediately below Yeats' "An Acre of Grass". When you look up both, you will realise that the difference is not one of degree at all, it is of kind. You cannot, by injecting better words or images in Dowson's essentially false and trivial poem, hope to make it come up to even a minor lyric by Yeats. Without going into the question of form here, the point to be made thus far, is this: a truthful and purposive poem has at least a chance of being a good poem, the other kind has none.

I COME now, last of all, to an unfortunate aspect of this question of quality. Unfortunate, because it is based upon natural inequality and does not admit mitigation. This is the aspect of the quality of the mind of a poet. After truth and seriousness of purpose, it is the prime cause of excellence or the lack of it in any work of art. This is a 'given' quality and there is little that upbringing, education, or experience would do to improve it. Every single time you read and are touched by, like or understand a poem, your reaction in one sentence is this: the mind of this poet as apparent in his or her work is such that I would be interested in the truth of the world that it perceives. A carpenter, for instance, may feel as strongly as a poet, the emotion of love for his mistress. But if all that he can say about her is that her eyes are like lotuses, he will ever remain a strong-emotioned carpenter, and not a poet, who said, "My mistresses' eyes are nothing like the sun. . . ." If natural inclination, circumstances of birth and upbringing, temperament and felicity of expression, all smile upon you, you are in the way of becoming a poet, provided you remember truth and seriousness of purpose. But to be a *good* poet, you also have to possess that extra, that special sort of mind that assimilates seemingly commonplace sensations, sieves them through layers of

previous experiences or life-learning and transmutes them into poetry, into a view of life, into something they never were—a coherence. This extra quality of the mind does not depend on nationality, class, caste, creed, sex, education. Illiterate men and women, no more than struggling agricultural labourers or farmers' wives have produced some of the most valuable, beautiful and truthful poetry I know.⁴ I do admit that this is arbitrary, unfair and discouraging. You can go out and experience the thrilling excitements of strange and faraway places, you can plunge into mad and torrid love-affairs, you can be the underest of underdogs and drink deep from the cup of misery, you can perfect your sense of language with the aid of all the dictionaries and thesauruses and there is still no guarantee that you will amount to anything more than a pebble rattling round words. And there will always exist an Emily Dickinson who hardly ever left her house, let alone town, who met no more than a couple of dozen people in her creative life and whose silent and deeply felt involvements produced tremendous poetry that depended on the sheer quality of her mind and nothing else.

With these three ingredients and the definitions of the last essay, I do not claim that the job is done. There are many other condiments and subtle flavours to go in according to individual taste. But with the meat (or veg. if you please), salt, pepper and butter you have got the essentials of a gourmet dish. Later, we will consider the last prime essence, the wine in it as it were—the *form of a poem*.

⁴I can cite only from Marathi: Bahinabai and Chokha.

TRANSITION

Siddharth Kak

I have seen such
 landscapes before,
Brimmed tears, seen poetry before
In the frozen waters of this sea, classic
 profile of this yacht,
Where now I am dry-eyed, no more
 a poet, simply a drunk
Executive watching wheatfields iridescent
 with dawn, stagnant with
Monsoon's mica, water rust, from a
 train window in
October, near Mathura,
 a season of parrots,
Furlong upon furlong of cats-tails. . . .

I thought it temporary.
Bombay, I thought, the strenuous life
 disrupt the mood.
Ride into the country, give up all
 and find your tongue once more.

Now desperate, I whip the metaphors
Unearthing only a giant monotony of *sarson*,
Fields of *bhutta*, carrots, seeding onions,
No poetry, in this landscape glittering heat.

Sweating, I reassure myself ; there
 is always evening
In the country, settling like a powder puff
 on the exhausted earth.
There, in fragrant night lies the magic
 hour of poetry. . . .
But long after evening fluffs its wings
 over the heated landscape,
And night whispers its breeze through
 interstices ;
Disturbed still by dust and coal,
The restless mind yields no poetry.

I caution against hysteria, thinking
Patient, simply the first day you have
 evaded the city ;
Give the instinct time to hone itself
 before Kashmir.
So thinking, observing from the plane
The magnificent cavalcade of the Himalayas,
Unstirred, gathered by no surge,
Sterile even here, in my origins,
I stand, head bowed,
 at midnight, mountains
Heaving like seas in starlight, standing
 in silent orchards,
In cold immense, fragile as glass ;
Offering to the gods this verse ;
This distorted poem unsettled from the hearse.

THE GARDEN

Saleem Peeradina

LET me try to describe to you the place as I remember it, the town that was for me, to start with, only a street with houses and shops on either side with a traffic intersection at one end and on the other, a quiet retreat where I sometimes accompanied my grandfather on walks. Then it gradually became a territory that had not only a railway station from where Father went to work everyday, and a bus terminus from where we went, on a weekly afternoon, to the seashore ; it also had a school, a market, an ice factory, a saw mill, a stone quarry, a park and many kinds of shops and small restaurants. Even then it never occurred to you that Andheri itself was but a small section of that big city the adults talked about, which lay a long way to the south and where the train made its final stop before returning to these distant parts of the country around and beyond you. You had no conception except that you could look up and see far into the sky, and when you were near the ocean, the sails on the further end of the water always stretched your sight to its limits. But before this time, when the street was the only area you looked out upon daylong through the verandah's railing and through the trees in the yard, the one place you knew thoroughly and which always kept you occupied was the garden.

Between the door at the end of the verandah and the single flight of stairs going down into the garden there was a latch only the adults could reach. So whenever I shook the bars and rattled out my intent to be let loose, I could be taken down by the servant. My mother believed that sunlight and dirt were healthy for a growing child and she recalled in later years that I avoided the first and delighted in the second. There was a wall around our house that enclosed within it a fairly large backyard and small frontyard and a parallel strip of ground on either side of the house. The side near the stairs led to the compound gate and was a sort of passage. In the front, just touching the house and then again in a row against the wall there were many kinds of flowering-trees. I remember especially a

queen-of-the-night creeper that climbed all the way up to the first floor verandah. Its perfume mingled with the quiet of night and the cool air provided just the right backdrop for an after-dinner huddle when we would sit on mats in the verandah and mother told us stories of the colourful men and women who were prophets of Islam.

The flower that appealed to me most grew in a row of trees on the other side of the house. This was the white lily. The short shrubs with long yellow-green leaves stood there, day after day it seemed, without any apparent purpose because they produced nothing. Besides, the ground was untended and full of weeds and we were told not to linger around there or some reptile could get us. From the window of my parents' room upstairs, from where I had once thrown out our cat to find out how its expression would change, I could see the silky green leaves fountain out of the ground. Then, about the time it began to rain, a knife-like shape at the end of a tall stalk appeared. This was an unforeseen development and sure enough, clusters of white, thin-petalled flowers plonked out overnight. The lilies had a keen, heady scent and asked invitingly to be plucked because they looked so securely unreachable. But I did risk snake and insect bites to get there (I really believed there was a nest of reptiles in the undergrowth) and brought back this novelty to plant it like a trophy in a vase on the chest of drawers.

The other flower tree—unique because its ample supply of flowers served as temple-offerings—stood at the front end of the compound. This was a species of champa, a small five-petalled white flower with yellow insides that made a tiny rounded pit in the centre. The dark green boat-shaped leaves came and went but the flowers persisted. The early morning temple-goers in the neighbourhood would collect delicately the night's fallen flowers in a small basket or handkerchief. Shaking an upper limb of the tree would scatter five more handfuls. None could be denied what went at the feet of the Lord. He was everyone's although we were not Hindu. So the tree belonged to everyone. My father, who always expected free benefits, reckoned that some of the shrine's blessings might come his way if the deity took note that the flowers came from *his* garden!

EVEN better than this fertility of bushes and leaves and flower-trees were the many varieties of fruit trees my grandfather had planted some thirty years ago: mango, jamboo, guava, custard-apple, papaya, chickoo, banana, coconut, badaam and drumsticks. Since most of the fruits were seasonal there was never a time when all of the trees would be barren. The guava, custard-apple and chickoo were young trees—two or three of each and did not involve any extend looking-after or gathering when the fruit was ready. Also guavas would be eaten green or yellow but chickoo and custard-apple would have to be buried under rice to mature and that

wasn't any fun. Anything you had to wait for that was not even in your sight did not interest you. Mangoes also had to be kept in layers of hay and warm blankets to ripen but that was more dramatic because it was on a much larger scale. Also the mangoes never rotted before they ripened; chickoo and custard-apple frequently did. Anyone who possessed mango and jamboo trees in their own garden was considered lucky because the fruits were delicious and were expensive in the market. We had five huge mango trees and four big jamboo trees. Towards the end of winter broom-shaped twigs would erupt tiny flowers that were the first signs of the coming crop of mangoes in the peak of summer. The jamboo trees were filled with feathery yellow flowers that the bees constantly hovered around. Summer at last brought with its heat this abundance of white and green fruit. From every window in the house we watched this slow transformation with great impatience.

Large and rounded mangoes with their graceful pointed ends hung in our sleep, bunches of crunchy, juicy jamboos teased our eyes, made our mouths water. The white fruit of course ripened earlier than the green. While the tree was filling up and swelling, the branches we could reach with small sticks soon became our starting point to the summer's treat. The right moment was always after lunch when mother and father were resting and we could sneak out with a long stick for an afternoon snack. We also made a try at the nearest mango which was always much further away than the nearest jamboo. By four o'clock when the parents got up, everything would be in its place and we, as dumb as good little children always are, never betrayed any signs of the afternoon's enterprise. Of course, an untimely stomach-ache could ruin everything!

THE big day, however, came when Dagdu, the cobbler's boy, and Manhar, the drunkard's son would be sent for and preparations would be under way for the great haul of fruits. Each of us would be called upon to keep an eye on the proceedings—Father, great believer in keeping an eye on everything (never trust any one!) would of course be the Master Eye—ordering the whole show as bag-full upon bag-full of fruit would be lowered from the trees and emptied into big round mats and metal plates. Mangoes required a more complicated technique because they couldn't be reached as easily as jamboos which could be plucked with the hand. Only a stick with a knife at one end and a cloth bag tied below it could do the job. Mangoes knocked down were no good even if unbroken—they went to the kitchen for *chutney* or jam or syrup. The object was to get them unhurt and whole and Manhar would disappear into the uppermost fringes of the tree to go after the last one. The exciting moment came when he would be required to reach the ones that hung way out on the roof of the house. Then, while everyone, especially my mother, held their

breaths Manhar roof-walked in the most lighthearted manner and picked the tree clean. Both boys were given a rupee each and handfuls of fruits for delivering the harvest and getting ant-bitten all over. Manhar, who was older, grew up to be the neighbourhood tough, worked irregularly at odd jobs, gambled and drank and ran into police trouble. Dagdu, who was more loyal, did all sorts of running-around jobs for the family, joined us in our cricket-matches and was especially good at giving head-and-body massage. Mehboob, everybody's favourite uncle at the time, employed his services regularly when he wanted a "professional hand" (otherwise I doubled for him). He did well at a night school for a time and at a job his father wanted him to take so his son would not inherit the cobbler's shed. One day we heard that while chasing a kite, he had been run over by a train. He was always a cheerful chap with a funny head that was as flat as a square stone. Everyone ragged him about it till he would yell or stop speaking to us. Then all you had to do was jab a finger into his ribs and he would rejoin the company with a shout.

For the sheer pleasure of it we heaved our arms and fingers through the heap of fruits that awaited distribution. Most of the mangoes we kept for ourselves and for the extended family who claimed an equal share in the property my grandfather had left behind. But the jamboos went a long way into many houses. Every year friends and relatives who praised our good fortune in possessing such an abundance of fruit naturally established a claim to share in it. It was a tradition then, even before they dropped hints or sent up messages, to send a sample of jamboos to as many family friends as possible. Mother always dutifully and heartily endorsed this practice and never forgot anybody. We, the kids, had already appropriated more than our share by then, so it was all right with us.

THE biggest ceremony however concerned the thrice-yearly plucking of the eight coconut trees in our garden. These were gigantic trees and bore coconuts that contained the sweetest of milk. When a coconut turned grey and fell with a shrivelled thud, you stretched your neck to see what you expected to find—it was time for the coconuts to be brought down. Then you sent for one of the men in the neighbourhood who could accomplish the deed. The primitive method was to pluck them by hand and then drop them one by one to the ground. This not only entailed waste, it was also dangerous especially as trees stood overlooking the street. Sometimes when the expert who came with rope was not available, we had to hire the crazy substitute who worked so eagerly that he literally sent down a shower of coconuts. It was rough having to stand on the road and keep bystanders and inquisitive passersby at a safe distance from the pathway under the tree. But it was fun. More often than not, an innocent old lady, deaf to all the feverish activity going on around her would

casually stroll through the cleared space under the tree and your alarmed cry only served to transfix her right on target. Seconds after her revelation sent her scampering, muttering loudly against the world's insensitivity towards old women, you heard Kantan's signalling yell followed by a downpour of merrily bouncing coconuts. This would be followed by an all-clear and every activity that had been voluntarily suspended on the busy road, would resume its normal breathing. Mother of course was breathless with terror lest someone get hurt. Father overseeing everything as usual, abused the crowd, warned Kantan this was the last time he would hire him, but kept his eagle eye on the coconuts. The coconuts were gathered in baskets, transported to the house and the procession of bystanders, expecting more to come, followed the artist to the next tree where you witnessed an instant replay of recent history!

Compared with Kantan's performance, Devu's approach was tame. He was quiet and business-like and conducted himself most efficiently. He would climb up monkey-like with a rope extending downward. Then he disappeared in the greenery. When he gave the rope a tug you released arm after arm of rope and saw great bunches of coconuts slowly dipping groundwards. We would request green tender coconuts for immediate consumption because the rest of them were ripe and the coconut crust hard. The tender ones you opened, gulped down their milk with a rich thirst and scraped the flesh out with a spoon. In the house upstairs, the room would be filling up with the big harvest and mother would begin dividing it into four equal parts: whatever come off the land was shared equally by my two uncles, one aunt, and us.

THE tree that was magnificent in stature and bearing was the lone badaam tree in the backyard that towered in benign indifference to the rest. Its leaves were smooth and rounded and leathery and it was the only tree whose leaves changed colour from green to red to brown when the year's cycle sped through its pith. Its fruit was unlike anything else and not to everyone's taste. It was a rounded two-pointed fruit with a nut that rested like an exclamation mark in its hollow; its middle was fibrous and its outside was a layer of thick skin that could be eaten. It ripened during the monsoon and fell with the rains. You could not get it for the asking, its branches were lifted way up above the ground. It released its load in the rain and whoever got up early in the morning had to go down and collect the fruit from the mud before the neighbourhood children swept it up. Like some of the other trees that declined in output as the years went by or just lost their sweetness, the badam tree died a slow lingering death. It was infected by a fungi that loosened the bark off its sides and stripped off its leaves and finally left it a great empty hulk of dead wood. We saw it dying and couldn't save it; saw it

losing its dignity and wondered what price it would fetch at the lumber market.

At one end of the backyard there was a big well with crystal clear water and on the other, where banana and papaya trees grew out of the waste-water gutter there was a cesspool which was a forbidden area for the kids and therefore regularly frequented. I recall the municipality truck making the rounds of the houses in our neighbourhood, about once a week, to empty the pool in bucket-loads of green and brown water. The solid waste was collected in cans from the baskets that were placed right below the lavatory, and carried on the head in tin boxes usually by women "scavengers". As a child you were fascinated by everything that was strange and unusual and what was filth to every grown-up was not so to my indiscriminating mind. So there was nothing shocking or degrading about the whole business. Except that you were aware that only certain people were employed in this service and that they were regarded as the scum of society. You knew also that "bhangi" was a term of abuse that would be used with great effect to put someone down. Years later, when drainage pipes were laid, these unfortunate people still continued to work in other sections of waste and garbage disposal.

Owning fruit trees brought its hazards. The jamboo and mango especially were susceptible to endless sieges from the neighbourhood kids who came either singly or in gangs. Besides, there was a municipal school next door and they practically lived off the produce of our land, plucking fruit from the branches that reached into their windows. Flying stones were a source of constant nuisance and my father exploded with fury at the thieving scoundrels. He did even better: he ordered us to collect all the stones we could lay our hands on and kept them at strategic places around the house. If he ever caught a boy throwing stones, he would throw one right back at him! His aim was always ruined by his anger but the spectator below was evidently startled by the appearance of a stone shooting out of the house, singing through the leaves and barely missing him. Since yelling didn't scare anybody, father thought it legitimate to use more effective means. The fruit, however, was compelling. We had no peace, and Father found a ready vocation that allowed him to exercise his moral authority.

WHEN my grandfather built the house in the early years of 1900, my father was fond of saying, Andheri was a wilderness. There was a dirt road going from the station to Versova and the Patils were the only other family beside us, who owned a bungalow in the immediate neighbourhood. There were no street lamps and instead of the bus service we now have, you saw only tongas and bullock carts. Grandpa was a respected member of the community, not only because of his social position (he was

superintendent of a textile mill), but also because he was an actively benevolent old man. He was also an honorary magistrate of his district and, while my father has no memory of the cases that came to him, Grandpa was always looked upon as a kind and considerate person to whom people brought all sorts of gifts—grain, poultry, fruits, flowers—to show their appreciation and their regard for him. But Grandpa always made a point of refusing any offering that had the slightest suggestions of a bribe. The rest would literally be forced upon him. I learnt this much later in my boyhood, when he was no longer living but to me, when I was barely five, Bapaji, as everyone referred to him, was the person I liked best because he made it clear, by his attention and affection for me, that I was very special.

IT was on my grandfather's knee that I learnt the alphabet. His easy-chair always occupied a corner in the large living-room in which the other important objects of my childhood were the clock with the golden dial, roman numerals, spidery black hands and chiming bell; a Marconi radio, and a superb three-tiered light with a globed lamp in the centre that hung from the beam and was switched on only on special occasions when uncles and aunts and cousins came visiting on Sundays and we would wait for Father to ask one of us to turn on the "big" light. In later years, when the extended family did not meet as frequently and spontaneously as in the past, or when they came together always fought more than they ate and laughed, Sunday would still remain a special day by the fact that you could ask for the big light to be turned on. But at five, Grandpa was the most important daytime fixture in the house. He had infinite patience and all the time for my games and my inquiries. He was gentle, tolerant and as accommodating an adult a child could wish for. My mother would not interfere or take me to task for a supposed misdemeanour, because Grandpa was there to make up a lively story on my behalf. My mother never believed that Grandpa was spoiling me, otherwise, like any mother, she would have exercised her authority. Grandpa was genuinely a good influence on me and I was an eager learner. In fact, it was his encouragement and his joy in my curiosity that made my days with him memorable. I was accepted as special and was given freedom to explore and to experiment. I mention this because after grandpa passed away, I could no more take this for granted. My father was a rigid disciplinarian—at least that is the sacred image he chose to project when we were little. He was actually a mindless bully as I discovered much later. But I am speaking ahead of events. Around Grandpa, besides being able to read newspaper headlines at an early age, I spelled and wrote and drew pictures of boats, trees, clouds and houses on those parts of the walls that would not be too easily noticed.

My love of the outdoors I also ascribe to the days when my grandfather took me with him on his walks. After you had walked ten minutes on the road going to Versova, and the residences were all left behind, you came to a quiet wooded stretch where a stream (actually, a trickle) appeared by the edge of the road and the only sound that broke the silence was the dull blast of stone being dynamited for the quarry close by. I gazed and poked around and plunged myself completely in this world of grass, stone and water. The place, although much changed in later years by the coming of a more rapid economic pace, the building of houses, the continuous transporting of stone by trucks, the establishing of a college nearby and the growth of slums—was for many years one of the favourite haunts of my introspective boyhood. Something I had found I went to seek repeatedly ; or, maybe something that I had lost, and wanted to recover and keep.

At night time my refuge was my grandmother. Her I remember more distinctly than I do my grandfather. Grandpa provided the stimulation and support for my activity during the day. He was a figure of constancy and his presence assured total independence in my movements. Grandma provided the embrace and the warmth a body could breathe by merely snuggling into her. I hardly remember the physical proximity of my grandpa—he was by my side when I needed him—but the sweet odour of my grandmother's skin, the smell her clothes carried and the bony frailty of her body made my happiness complete. She was a tall, lean woman with a small, thin face and liquid eyes. She wore long dresses you could run into and feel the air billow out of before you found a body.

WHEN Grandma was close to dying and I was told she was ill and needed sleep, that I would keep her awake if I slept with her, they gave me a cape of hers that smelled just like her and I curled round it holding one end in my mouth to suck on. Nobody smelled exactly as homey as did Grandma.

I remember clearly the day when they all gathered around her bed. Nobody told me what was going on and I found myself sitting by the bed-post feeling strangely left out, trying to show I understood everything and that I didn't need any help. In reality I was bewildered. One day you are out walking safely, conscious of Grandpa walking right behind you, then you turn to smile or turn with a question raised in mid-air or turn to see by how many paces you can outrun him and you see a blank street. No Grandpa and you panic seeing yourself bitten and mauled and carried away by all the promised monsters. Or you're engrossed in play and can hear Grandma moving about softly in the kitchen and you can pick up her scent, but when you run to her she's gone. Nobody can explain to your satisfaction who took her away. You're in knots inside and something is

rising in your throat asking to be let out, but you're afraid to show tears. The tears were on the verge of forming but even at the age of six I possessed this dual fear of showing the real state of my mind, and extending my arm for help. They will find out you don't understand and they will pat your back and fold you away in a secret place. I displayed instead a distant half-smile that said I'm okay but which was really a plea for time to catch up with a phenomenon that didn't explain why it was happening. I am not going to speculate how or when this emotional split developed or whether it was organic or learnt, but I know it became a deeply ingrained part of my personality. There by the best-post, I was totally on my own, discouraging any offer of help and yet groping all around for the right word to be spoken to me. I wanted to see what they were taking away from me. Something was being unclasped—Grandma getting up to go to the bathroom and never reaching the place, the cape in my mouth providing the juice I sustained myself on—something was being moved away, wrapped in a sheet and guarded with moth-balls. Everyone else knew and wept over it as if they had been expecting it, as if it were right to have happened and right to have to mourn its passing. Something as utterly inexplicable as this had never occurred before.

GRANDPA's funeral which had been conducted some time previously was an event like any other in a child's taste for drama. His death must have occurred outside my witnessing and we, the children, must have been given some explanation for the preparations that were underway. Because we took it as a joke. Besides, Mehboob, never ever solemn about anything, provided the humorous angle on the whole affair for the benefit of the kids. My favourite cousin Laila (she and I were inseparable), who responded most readily to Mehboob's jokes and I, who responded eagerly to whatever she responded to, giggled on the figure of the whole ceremony after the burial. The trip to the cemetery, and the burial itself—the swift walk, the passing of the coffin from shoulder to shoulder, the lowering of the white-wrapped body, the reciting of prayer, the covering up of the grave and the placing of the head-stone—were highly exciting. Afterwards was the meal for everyone on straw-mats spread out in the garden. Mehboob joked about how every funeral could be made worthwhile if followed by a free meal! They said Grandma's strength had declined rapidly after Grandfather's death. And she had followed him in less than a year's time.

Around the time when both my grandparents were still living, but knew, as only the old have a way of knowing, that they were not going to be around much longer, Mehboob must have been twenty-five. His three brothers and one sister were all, as we say, settled and had families of their own. Mehboob was the only son yet single and he was quite a swinger.

Before anything—God forbid—happened to them, his parents wanted to see him married so they could go to the rest with the comforting thought that they had done their duty. So the day came when the chosen girl was put before Mehboob's scrutiny and—to everybody's amazement (and relief!) Mehboob approved. The handsome young devil, the good-timer, the carefree bachelor actually approved! Well, said everybody, he is really not the irresponsible, swollen-headed fellow one took him to be, although he had been the most advanced in matters of the heart. Although he had laid many a girl and had free-lanced his early youth, we all commit follies in our youth, they said (none of them had!). But looked at from any side, the moment was an auspicious one and was sufficient cause for 'jubilation' and moralising. Thus came about the marriage and the coming of an aunt, who would be for the next ten years, the most appealing diversion in my boyhood.

As anticipated, Grandfather passed away not too soon after the bride came home. In any normal Indian family suspicion would be aroused regarding the bride's evil stars and although our family was close-knit and sane, you did hear a faint whisper in distant quarters. Of course when Grandma followed suit, it *had* to be the new bride! It is not that common sense is blocked out or that people believe in evil influences, but that the spice of conversation is always provided by illogical or, in the eyes of tattlers, self-evident truths. Members of the inner family, however, laughed at the suggestion, did everything to discount the "silly" talk: so the bride remained untainted.

A UNTY's coming never affected me while Grandma was living: I belonged to her completely. Grandma did everything for me—I wouldn't let anyone attend to me in the bathroom; nobody could make me eat if I decided to be stubborn; but if a gesture came from Grandma it meant the world for me. When I first entered school next door—since they thought I was bright and since the school was at hand, it would do me no harm even if I was pre-school-age at the time—Grandma had to go with me. But then, since it was pointed out to me quite mockingly that I was the only kid who brought his own Grandma along to school, I recognised the threat to my self-image and gave her up during school hours. Yet, as she suggested, I only had to peer out of the window and I would catch sight of her. The knowledge that she moved about in the house was immensely gratifying. How could I foresee, much less comprehend that this would ever be different, that without warning, I would be forced to yield, to give up, to become orphaned?

That is what everyone said: I grieved as if my mother had died. She had, and no one could convince me to the contrary. I sulked and drew inward silently, refusing any offer of solace. My mother must have

found it painful to see a disheartened child and to have to face his rejection of her. I showed no recognition of her. She seemed an utter stranger to me. I shrank like a hurt animal into the furthest reaches of my blankness.

They believed I was dead serious—it was no passing phenomenon—something had to be done about it. My uncle it was who suggested that they find me a brand new replacement. He knew it had to be an offer of that which in concept resembled what I had possessed ; at the same time since what was unique could not be paralleled, it had to have an element of novelty that would interest me sufficiently to examine it, as I would, a toy. And then, by one of those unpredictable chances that occur in a child's turning of a corner, which wipes off the scene behind his eyes and carries him negligently into the event placed before him, my uncle pronounced for me a cause and a pursuit. Nothing had been settled or understood on my part. The broken piece was removed slyly from my grasp when I had fallen asleep with it and a shining new bribe had taken its place. My aunty had solidified into a body and a face that I melted into. Something had been forgotten in a single stroke, something else heartily accepted. Looking back over it, nothing had altered definitely : I could be using another means for the same nightwishes. And yet something had been added that had not existed in Grandma, something that existed separately and did not add up to Grandma, yet was not in itself insufficient. Aunty smelt good and her embrace enclosed my entire loss.

TWO POEMS

Satya Dev Jaggi

THANK HEAVENS

It's good, indeed, that everything is not always pleasant
for our systems, and not pleasant to all
of us, and all pleasant things are not equally so
at all occasions. Thus alone may we tell
the pleasant from the unpleasant and the not so pleasant,
and be kept for ever engaged in experiment
with things and people, and keep content,
though not, thank heavens, to our full intent.

ON THE BACK OF A CLICHE

The rickety wooden steps
of a worn-out idea
called a cliché
assist you to withstand
the deafening crescendo of a new experience,
for it overwhelms you not
till you are taken by the root.

Gradually, the pull
of the new begins
to tell. Hence
you tore the sacred thread,
commenced to dance,
men being drunken creatures all.

Leaning under her hair,
pushing up her blouse
and giving her pink breast a firm squeeze,
I dared outgrow
my made-to-measure fit of romance.

THE CORONER

Kamala Das

WHEN Sylvestre Louis Gomes went to each of the twenty-four flats to collect rent for his aged master who lived all by himself on the ground floor of the sixty year old building called the Rose Manor he normally wore his blue shirt and a pair of Khaki shorts that swirled round his thin flanks like a skirt. But on Wednesday, the fourth of November, he knocked at the tenants' doors dressed in a shiny teeshirt made of black nylon and a pair of dark trousers that obviously belonged once to his stout master. The married lady on the first floor who was expecting her first baby gave him a genial smile. You are three days late, she said, running inside to fetch her purse. Sylvestre allowed himself to perch on the cane settee, on its very edge, and saw under it a cat lying fast asleep in a flat basket filled with torn woollen socks. The lady was probably mending her husband's socks, he said to himself. He felt warm and quite at ease in the company of virtuous women. The girls on the top floor who went out with strangers every night made him very uncomfortable. They haunted his thoughts, torturing the serene forest of his mind with loud shrieks like young parakeets. Several times he had told his master of their nocturnal movements but the old one, shrewd businessman that he was, only chuckled and said, Sylvestre Louis, live and let live. And counting the currency, he would say, money is after all money. . . .

Mister Gomes, will you have a cup of tea, asked the young lady, handing him a cheque. No, Miss, only a glass of water if you please, said Sylvestre. When he was sipping the iced water, she sat on a chair and said, you don't look well today. Have you been ill?

Not ill, said Sylvestre. A tragedy happened in my family this Sunday. Then for the first time she noticed his black clothes. Oh I am so sorry, she said, cupping her narrow face with both hands, I hope it was not some one very close to you. . . . He smiled wanly. It was somebody very close to me, Miss. It was my only son Richie. I have talked about him

to you. Richard. The one who got the salesman's job at the Handloom House. His twentythird birthday was to be in December. He was born on the twenty-fourth. When he was born my uncle Reggie told us that we should call him Noel. So he was christened Richard Noel Septimus. He didn't do so well at school. Got plucked so many times. But just before his S.S.C. exam. his mom promised Our Lady of Mahim a novena and so he got through with a high third. Even the Father at his school, the Principal, was surprised. Richie was like that, a good for nothing fellow, fooling around with girls before he was sixteen. The Father used to meet me outside the church after the morning Mass and he used to say, I am sorry for you Sylvester, you are a god-fearing man but you have a very heavy cross to bear, your boy is a born repeater and if he goes on at this rate he will pass the S.S.C. only by the time he reaches forty. . . . His mom spoilt him. Him being her only child and so fairskinned. Gave him money stealing from my pocket at night, and he went to the cinema and smoked, and danced with the bad girls, but I could do nothing. My wife has been having T.B. for so many years, Dr. Pereira is treating her, he gives all the sample-medicines free like the Iron Pills and the Liver Extract but she is still so thin, so weak, and if I beat her she will fall down and die. . . .

BUT how did this happen, asked the young lady. Her voice was so melodious and sad that the cat stirred itself and opened its eyes. Sylvester smiled again and tugged at the neckline of his teeshirt as though it was choking him. He went with his friends for a swim, Miss, he said. After grub he got up and left carrying his bathing trunks and a towel. Don't swim on a full stomach, his mom told him. He had eaten well. His mom is a good cook. Every Sunday no matter how tired she is she prepares for us a good solid lunch. It is either mutton in gravy or pork vindaloo. She says the Good Lord He wants us to eat well and rest on Sunday. That day it was pork. Richie ate in a hurry. Then he called out from the verandah to his pals who were waiting for him on the road. They went to bathe in the sea off the Cuffe Parade, you know where the Tamilians have made little huts of tin. He got cramps. People saw him wave out for help. They thought he was fooling them. He was always a great one for fooling everybody. One day he came into the kitchen dressed up to look like a girl with lipstick on his face and some rags thrust inside his shirt. Then he holds out his hand at his mom and says, Halloo Missus Gomes, How nice to meet ya. . . . Oh how his mom laughed! When she laughs too much she coughs. It is as bad as weeping for her. Happiness never killed anybody, she used to say. But it was happiness that killed my boy. He was so happy and so full of fun. . . .

Oh it's terrible, cried the young lady. How will your poor wife ever get over this? She removed her glasses and wiped the corners of her eyes.

Sylvester felt greatly touched. Here was this nice Hindu lady weeping for poor Richie while his relatives secretly rejoiced at his death! Rejoiced because his status had again gone down with the boy's death. All of them were jealous of his son. He was so handsome and always wore such fashionable clothes. His penfriend in America had sent him through an air hostess two terylene shirts and a leather belt with the Beatles' songs written ever so nice in gold letters on its good side. His mom liked it so much. Now it is with his other things in an old trunk on the loft where Uncle Reggie's son hid it away so that mom will not see it and start weeping all over again.

You are a brave man, Mister Gomes, said the lady. He laughed. He looked into her tearful eyes. Don't you worry, Miss, he said. Such tragedies happen. The Good Lord knows what he is doing even if we don't. When I heard from the boys that Richie was drowned I ran out in the sun without my specs and also his mom without chappals in her old housecoat but the fishermen had already taken the body out and sent it to the city morgue. I went there to identify it. Without my specs I am nearly blind, Miss. But a son is after all a son. I can identify him with my eyes shut. This is what I told the Inspector. The coroner is a good chap. He could have created trouble for me. Everybody said he would refuse to part with the body until all investigations are over. My master had of course given the coroner a ring. He was at college in England with the Coroner's grandpop. They were thick pals then. So when I went to his room, the coroner, he gives me a nod and says Mister Gomes, you may take your son's body without any delay. Yes, Miss, I was really lucky.

NOTATIONS

III

Arvind Krishna Mehrotra

I

The kiln isn't far from here
And in the east
A little travelling remains.
I pack up three kinds of thread
A bottle of turpentine
The first aid kit
Tobacco.
Everything fits so snugly
In my large trunk that for once
It feels warm.
In the square
Two dolls
Are being tried.
I seldom begin a journey
On a Thursday.

II

The eyes don't seem
Well at all.
They smell like exhausted tea leaves
And they drop objects.
Lying in bed, looking
At the rocker constantly
Hit the same spot on the wall
I wonder how the rain feels
When it is measured
In inches.
In the photograph

Everyone wears a striped
Blazer, and tennis racquets
Are crossed like knives
In the background.

III

A line divided
Into equal halves
The difference between an isosceles
And a scalene triangle
Segmants
Fractions and multiples
Have all been replaced
By Humpty Dumpty in my mind.
Sleepwalking
I once bumped into thirty shelves.
The old lioness
Stands in the window
And waves
To the Sunday crowd.
A child starts crying.

IV

The long white room
Is draped like a bandage
Around me.
This used to be a quiet
Neighbourhood—hospitable
To earthworms and suitable
For the cultivation of miniature crocodiles—
Before a whole tribe
Of romans and italics
Moved in.
Dressed in his cap
And belt
The beggar of the city
Walks down the road
Like a dying planet.

V

The glass jar is filled
 With unused names
 Hiccups
 Archipelagoes, lists.
 My hand is cursive, and illegible.
 On a certain winter evening
 The Pied Piper returns
 A concise dictionary
 Under each arm
 And everyone is surprised.
 The thief
 Admires the house
 From the outside
 And leaves without annoying
 The cobbles.

VI

In square-shaped albums
 I collect
 Electrocuted bats
 Copper vessels
 Orange peel
 The different shapes of nine
 And culverts.
 By next week
 Another consignment of heirlooms
 Should arrive.
 The little boy
 Explains
 That more and more birds
 Are refusing
 To cross the equator.

VII

A widow nearby
 sells oysters
 And original teeth.
 One day she came to borrow
 A box of matches
 And I saw the many-sized pock-marks
 On her face.

The gardener thinks
She can predict the future
By rearranging them.
The last day
Will be
A coincidence.
A lonely general
Thinking of his daughter.

VIII

From the outlying districts
Visitors arrive.
The stone
The crow
The tree.
We sit around
Talking about simple
Believable things,
I show them my new pair of ampersands
And notice they are wearing last year's clothes.
The fish
Wishes it were
An illustration
In a book
Of symbols.

IX

The desert fanatics
Easily picked out the gaps
In the uneasy procession
Of mountains;
Then a few ships
Filled with low-born traders
Came round the Cape
And sighted the west coast.
An ingrown toenail
Irritates the heart.
The calf said to the lion
My mother awaits me
Let me go and inform her
Of my fate,
I promise to return.

X

The letter box
 Is the captain of my street
 And a good acquaintance
 Of the lighthouse.
 Every once in a while
 We get together
 And change
 The altitude of stars.
 The cold current turns red
 The warm current turns blue.
 The soldier, returning
 From furlough, checks
 His whistle and tin flag;
 His son learns how to count
 By watching trains.

XI

My childhood
 Wanders off into the family tree
 And the tree gets lost
 In the north.
 I'm told we followed the tracks
 Left by none in particular,
 The horse
 Was our animal
 And once in the plains
 We settled among rivers.
 Both prisoner
 And guard
 Notice
 The squirrel's
 Transparent leap.

XII

The simplest shapes remain
 And it's time
 To praise my friends
 The unsuccessful shopkeepers of my city
 The elementary teachers
 The boy who dusts my table every morning.
 They are my events.

I keep old combs
And bottles
And know nothing about architecture.
Just two days ago
The poet traded all
The rare lines
In his collection
For common ones.

XIII

Five shipwrecks make
One sailor.
I bought home the only pigeon
I ever killed
And hid it
Under a flower pot.
An organised group of ants
Stopped by.
After this incident I took
An interest in limestone quarries.
Three months in the year
Boats, lined alongside
An old fort,
Describe the landscape
And clouds wait somewhere above the Arabian Sea.

XIV

Not even the nine of diamonds
Can equal
The queen of spades' cruelty.
The blind librarian finds
That the first
And last books in his catalogue
Are identical.
I have one more superstition
It has to do with
Custard-apples.
The clown removes
His makeup
While the trapezist
Comes sailing
Through the air.

XV

She sits on the warm steps
 And combs
 Her hair,
 I go upstairs
 Open the toolbox
 Then look around for some wheels
 To fit the truck or cannon
 I've made
 Without nails or edges.
 They're safe for children.
 Each toy
 Stops at the door
 Then wants to turn and face me;
 An ant would simply have changed
 Its direction.

THE GIRLS

Gauri Deshpande

THEY met regularly once a week at the 'Scone and Crumpet'. Generally after work. Here they talked about a multitude of personal things such as the wife of the lover of one, or the impending arrival of the sister-in-law of the other. Not that the other did not have a lover. She did. But he was a goodnatured, uncomplicated fellow, arriving when called for and departing when thrown out. It was all, the first thought, a little boring. She never said so out loud of course. That was because they were so marvellously friendly. It was so rare for two women to form this kind of an enduring relationship. They would jokingly say some times that if they were not so definitely interested in men, they would become lesbians. And of course they both had husbands. These were always referred to with smiling fondness. They were very fond of their husbands. Besides, husbands were necessary to one's life. They hosted your parties, they poured out the drinks, dealt with fuses and washers, fussed when you felt ill, disciplined the children. Speaking of children, the older one, and she was considerably older than the other, had two, both nearly grown up and away at residential schools. The younger one's marriage was only five years old and she was childless still, claiming it was very patriotic not to have children in such an overpopulated country. Her friend sometimes thought that this was shirking an essential issue of womanhood, but then both were very liberated and did not think that a woman's lot was children and cooking.

They would have liked to meet often, but they lived in very inconvenient suburbs, absolutely at diametrically opposite ends. They were working on their husbands to move closer, but these efforts had not as yet fructified. Actually they had met and befriended each other when they were working at the same place some years ago. Since then both had changed to other jobs, but that place held a fond place in their memories. It was there that the older one had met her *grand passion*. He was a writer, which they considered very precious. They were both proud of

their intellectuality. At the drop of a hat either would plunge into any sort of an argument to prove that she could argue. Their husbands had fast become exhausted of this game, an unending argument, conducted on two entirely different planes, which the men were sure to lose, how, they knew not. So the writer person had come along just in time. He was a glutton for arguments. Only, he had this bitch of a wife, and what could you do about her demands on him? A most unreasonable woman, by all accounts. His accounts of course. The one with the tame lover considered the writer unreliable and moody. She would often drop hints into her friend's ear about the essential dichotomy in the lives of married men who had mistresses and the terrible role of the 'other woman' that her friend was taking on. And for what? I mean there are plenty more where that one came from. This last sentiment she kept to herself, however.

SOMETIMES they went shopping; but rarely. Their tastes in clothes did not really tally. The older one was fascinated by lacey bras. The younger one had said once laughingly, that she did not dare wear anything half as sexy, for her husband would turn into a tiger. The other husband had long ago given up turning into a mouse even, so that topic rather languished. Not that there was anything impulsive about the remark. On the other hand, it was the older one who was like that. Said whatever came into her mind. And her friend was really fond of her scatterbrained-ness. It was so quaint. The scatter, on the other hand admired the exact, organised levelheadedness with which the other did everything. No wonder she had acquired a tame and predictable lover. There was a predictability about her entire being, her every action almost, and this soothed the rather hodgepodge, nervous one. Some times she even tended to lean on her, to ask advice, though she was much the older, the more experienced, the wife of seventeen years and the mother of two. She had an ethereal quality about her, long and slender and fading. A breathlessness. Quite often the other, a chunky, squat, not unattractive woman in her mid-twenties, was contemptuous of this incompetence, this fumbling, this hovering of her friend. But then, she was so fond of her, so involved with her. It was impossible not to be indulgent.

They did not much like to accompany each other to dinner or lunch either. The younger one was forever on some madcap diet and it made the other absolutely ill to even look at her shovelling some disgusting mess of carrots and buttermilk down her reluctant throat. In spite being over forty and a mother twice over, she was slim and straight. Her breasts were firm enough to be liberated from her bra. It was only that she liked the lacy, dainty things, and besides, in the cold breeze her nipples tended to stand out and that embarrassed her. The younger one had a large droopy bust and clothes just looked sacklike on her, no matter how expensive

and well tailored. Looking at her voluminous presence no one would have suspected that she was the tidy one, almost compulsively tidy. It was just as well she had no children, she would have driven them batty. Each one secretly liked the husband of the other and felt that he wasn't getting the best of the deal. Of course their loyalty to each other made these two men absolutely out of bounds, but that did not stop them speculating laughingly.

"Oh, my husband would just die! He is such a prude. I must say I don't envy you the swap, if at all it were to take place."

"But I think he is such a darling! I love the way he sort of shrinks and draws in like a snail when I buss him—on the cheek, mind you! I am sure — would simply jump at you if you offered to kiss him. He is a one, he is."

The prude's wife was proud of her husband's disinterest in other women. It did not occur to her at such moments that he was not particularly interested in her either. When it did come into her flickery mind, she sighed and moaned at their weekly meetings. Her friend would cluck very sympathetically.

HOW is the 'problem' now?" she would demand solicitously. The 'problem' thus referred to, obviously in inverted commas, was the problem of the older one's frigidity. In seventeen years of marriage and after a couple of extra or pre (she was not sure any more) marital flings, and now a steady involvement with this writer chap, she still remained unacquainted with female orgasm.

"You mean nothing happens to you?" The other had asked incredulously when the confession had poured forth, some years ago. She had managed, throughout her sexual maturity to achieve her own satisfaction, almost as invariably as the man in question, by hook or by crook.

"If you know what I mean," she had said winking at her friend.

"Not that I don't feel *nothing*. I mean, it's pleasant enough, if it were not so much bother. But I don't know what all these people keep talking about, waves, and tremours and contractions and what not. I mean I feel about as nice as when I am having a shower, but that's all."

"Good heavens! You better see a doctor. There must be something wrong with you, you know."

"Oh, no, I would die. Imagine having him, or worse, her, poke at your insides and then say your. . . ." She broke off feeling too embarrassed. Her more enterprising friend suggested various things she could try, from such esoteric matters as carrots to more mundane fingers and more mechanical, or electrical vibrators. Consistent failure was reported after a couple of weeks.

"But you are not half trying, goddam it," wailed the advisor. "Don't you want to come?"

"Do you know, I guess I don't, if it's all that trouble. And besides I might get addicted to carrots, or worse, vibrators. And then where am I supposed to hide the bloody thing? I don't have locked drawers and things of my own."

"But you can hide a great big man, why not a teeny vibrator? And I am sure, you have not used it properly. Do you know where. . ."

"Now, look, I am simply not going to allow you to go on about it any more. If God meant me to have an orgasm, he would let me have it the normal, natural way, ok?"

And they had dropped the subject there, but for the affectionate query every week, and the negative answer. The orgasmic one was also very worried about the other's utter lack of indignation at various important things, such as corruption, stupidity, male-chauvinism, inhumanity of man to man.

"My pervert of a boss is an MCP!" she would announce one evening.

"What's that?"

"Male Chauvinist Pig, that's what." And then she would go into a long story of injustice, favouritism, discrimination and so on. The other would listen very alertly, but at the end of it would say, "My boss is a woman, and she does all the same things, where's the difference?"

THEY did like to agree about a lot of things. They agreed that every other person in the restaurant was stupid and ignorant and opinionated; that every man at heart was a slave-driving bastard; that love was an overrated emotion; that women had much more sense than men and the world would be a better place if it were ruled by women. They also agreed on what to say about latest best-sellers. *Love Story* was utter puke and *Godfather* shit, but Roth could be tolerated and a few actually made sense. They also agreed on the divinity of Indian classical music and referred to various prominent singers by their first names. Since one of them, the older, worked for a publishing firm, she knew a few big names in writing, and referred to them by their first names as well, to the envy of the other who worked in a bank. They felt really very happy and very exclusive when they agreed with each other and tore a few other writers or people to shreds, when they won an argument, or when they exchanged mournful, fond but proud news about the doings of their respective husbands. They had that rare bond, found so seldom in the sordid affairs of men: a true friendship.

It was after six today and she had been waiting a good fifteen minutes. Even last week the other one had abruptly cancelled their date. Was something wrong? Was her husband behaving peculiarly? Had he suspected the writer? Or any of the children? But no. Here she was at last, a half hour late and looking unusually dishevelled and . . . yes, usually helter-skelter and breathless.

As the older woman thumped herself down in the chair opposite her anxious friend, she let out an angry hiss.

"The bitch. The bloody, foul, useless, stupid Bitch."

"Who?" said her companion bewildered. Unprecedented, such venom.

"His wife. The slut."

"But what did she *do*?"

"She died, last week, heart attack, just dropped dead in front of the house, and what a week I have had, trying not to see him, trying to hold myself in, trying to act normal at home, oh god god god."

"But why don't you see him?" Still bewildered.

"Well, what kind of a louse do you think I am? When she was alive, it was her fault she couldn't hold onto her man, she was so stupid and slatternly. But what kind of a louse you think I am, to take away the husband from a dead woman? It would be too low. One couldn't do such a thing, could one? Could one?"

No, one couldn't, silently they agreed. And felt much better; nobler somehow, purer.

HOW THE BHIKSHU WAS BORN

K. D. Katrak

In the Beginning was the Void
And the Void was made gas
Gas was made Sun
Sun made Planet, Dust, Rubble, Tree and Elephant
Elephant after prolonged perturbation
Struggle prayer masturbation and effort
Made ape. Ape was a sluggard
Ape took his time
Ape gave a fuck about the urgency of evolution
Disdaining divine purpose ape buggered about.
In a million years ape became Parsee.
After that progress was quick
Centuries later only, Bhikshu's mother was born.

A little after the Beginning was Shy
Shy became Poor
Poor was made Boy.
Boy went to School
Boy was transformed by Conscious Effort
Sugar in Tea
Emeralds in Mud
Other Vast Experiences and the Divine Graces
To Determined.
Determined begat Businessman
Businessman became Husband.
At twenty eight, Bhikshu's father appeared.

About Now, the Angels in Heaven showed interest.
The birth of Bodhisattvas
Is no ordinary affair

Angels took Mama in hand
Angels bought fur coat
Angels brushed hair
Angels dealt with stubbornness
Straightened out prudery
Angels corrected stammer,
Tip tilted nose
Angels got Mama into bedroom.
Bhikshu's father smiled
Listened to Hitler on the radio
Drank too much tea.

Gandharvas were brought in, lustful musicians,
Rakhshasas, hormones, auras.
The Powers invoked demonology.

Bhikshu's father scratched and fiddled
Bhikshu's father got injected with testosterone
Bhikshu's father saw dirty movies
Read forbidden books, with a great gasp
Jumped into bed
Bhikshu's Mama went shopping.

Finally on the ninth day of Baisakh
Bhikshu's Mama had a dream
She saw a great white elephant
Footling around
Father had got in.

Prolonged applause in the Western Paradise.

A great pause.

In his Bardo, in his snuggle happy thumb sucked dream
Bhikshu dreamt of lollipops and popsies
Sports cars and magicians, Country houses and cognac,
Bhikshu dreamt he was Jesus Christ.

Hey said the Gandharvas
Get on said the Rakshasas
Your time is up said the Devas
Bhikshu snored

Such despicable behaviour from a Bodhisattva
Had not been witnessed for years.

Finally the great Arahāt Manjushri
Took the snivelling dreaming turd
Put it in a dish rag
Gave it to his favourite Chinese stork
Explicitly instructing the adept bird
Not to miss the Indian Ocean.

Down came the Buddha womb
Pitted by meteorites
Inert as Argon
Past dirty Banners
Off colour jokes
Through the seven levels
Of Being and Other Such
Astral Zones
Football Pools
No Parking Zones
Vacant Lots
Cheering Crowds
Strip Tease Shows
Cherubs
Elephants
Ghosts
Tubs
Tits!

Its a boy said Dr. Kerawala
There lay Bhikshu
Infant, bulbous, for the first time speechless,
With the World not saved
And Bombay a little
Dirtier than usual.

THE INDO-ENGLISH POET : SOME CHARACTERISTIC ATTITUDES*

Nissim Ezekiel

I INTEND to write this paper without mentioning names, either of poets or of critics. This is partly out of cowardice and partly out of consideration for the people concerned, most of whom I know personally. I wish I didn't, so I could be objective without inhibitions. My task is difficult and delicate enough without the involvements of literary politics. All serious readers of literature know how complex the simple business is of seeing a literary work as it is and not as it is said to be or appears to be.

My self-appointed responsibility is to see the Indo-English poet as he really is, which happens to be, for obvious reasons, as much an exercise in self-observation as in the observation of others in the field. My concern, as the title of the paper indicates, is with characteristic attitudes, that is, the attitudes common to the majority. I do not deal with the exceptions and their achievements, except when I refer to them as providing the norms or standards. I assume that without reference to standards, no discussion of this or any other subject makes sense. And it is precisely the question of standards which is my starting point.

The most striking feature of most discussion on the Indo-English poet is that it makes no distinction between one level of achievement and another. The highest level, the lowest level, and all the levels in between, are spoken of in the same terms, using the same critical idiom and purporting to describe but in reality confusing specific poetic and intellectual qualities. Thus the word philosophical, which is dubious in its application to even the best of the Indo-English poets is freely used about almost all of them, including those who barely qualify as poets at all or even as versifiers.

* Paper read at a Seminar on Indian Writing in English sponsored by the University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, January 1973.

There is something in the Indian mind which embraces the word philosophical at the first evidence of the most ordinary thinking. If I say in a poem that honesty is the best policy or two plus two make four I am sure some critic will crawl out from beneath his academic rock to praise my depth of philosophical understanding and my grasp of reality, my profound ethical sense and my love of truth and simplicity.

The effect on the Indo-English poet is worth noting. Instead of being disgusted at this display of intellectualised illiteracy, he revels in it, and longs for more on the same lines. He soon convinces himself that he has the noble and rare "qualities of heart and head," as they are called in India, in a special superior blend which spells genius. Accordingly, he churns out more of the same commonplaces in infinite variations and these in turn are found to be philosophical. So let me put on record my firm view that among the living Indo-English poets, and even among the dead ones, not a single one can properly be called philosophical.

As for Sri Aurobindo, whatever may be the worth of his philosophy, which I need not dispute here, it fails utterly and completely to become poetry in his verse because he treats English as a dead, unchanging language, the language of Shakespeare, Milton, the Romantics and Tennyson but not the language that English has become in the twentieth century.

I Promised not to mention names but I may give an example, lest I be accused of exaggerating. This example will serve a double purpose. It demonstrates how the word philosophical is used in place of the word banal or nonsensical. And it demonstrates our propensity to rely on certificates of worth to impress others, the tragedy being that others *are* impressed.

My young Indo-English poet who is also a college teacher, publishes his first book of poems, just eight of them. There is a "Publisher's Note" in which the poet is contrasted with Omar Khayyam and his gifts attributed to Allah, the Almighty. There is a Foreword by no less a person than the foremost authority on Indo-English literature and a Vice President of the Sahitya Akademi, who claims, as I expected, that the poet's "flair is for philosophising." There are two substantially expressed "Opinions", one by an eminent Vice Chancellor, and the other by a "critic." There is a Preface by the poet in which he calls his own poems "serious, metaphysical, symbolic and highly reflective." This is followed by an Introduction by an eminent professor who meanders four pages on Harmony, Havoc, Peace, Anarchy, Bhakti Yoga, and the concept of time. He then announces the poet as a "major Indo-Anglian poet."

After these six introductory glorifications, including one piece of blatant

self-glorification, naive though it is, one reads this major philosophical Indo-English poet:

Man craves for peace
Subjective peace and objective peace
Peace of heart and peace of Mind
Solace for the spirit and peace of all kind.

Man's stir and striving is futile
His alluring attempt is juvenile
His call and claim is of no trace
To achieve this divine darling peace.

It is often argued that such a book should be left alone, that to take it seriously even to the point of a sneer and a jeer is to attach too much importance to it. If this were an extreme example of eccentricity and self-delusion I would agree. But it is not. The same sort of thing happens in different ways all the time, with varying measures of sophistication proving to be the only fig-leaves. There are very few Indo-English poets who have not at some time been written of as major, often by other Indo-English poets who are of course major, or by professors who are "eminent."

The truth is that we have a few readable minor Indo-English poets and a few who have written one or two readable minor poems and may write more. To make any other claim is foolish. The ethos of Indo-English poetry is today vitiated by claims, which have taken the place of criticism. The characteristic attitude of the Indo-English poet, is: Call me a genius or get out of my sight. Since I have some experience of art criticism, let me add that it is the same with Indian painters and extends perhaps to many others, in which case the root cause must be sought in the condition and fate of being Indian, in modern India.

Instead of trying to be great, at this stage, we should try to be honest and realistic. Even quite talented Indo-English poets are perfectly willing at the slightest opportunity that comes their way to treat their talent in highly inflated terms and to write in a carefully created atmosphere of adulation. Thus, one young man persuades a still younger woman, not yet a graduate, to write about his poetry in a periodical and insists on her using the word "compassionate" to describe one of its qualities, against her better judgment. Another, who publishes his own books, has brought out no less than ten collections within a few years, each boosting his own image, in slightly more extravagant terms each time.

To multiply examples would be tedious but to take consolation from the fact that similar things happen elsewhere is wrong. Conditions elsewhere are different. The reality of English and American poetry or even of Australian, Canadian and New Zealand poetry is not affected by such activities, whereas the reality of Indo-English poetry is affected. This reality has to be defined yet, whereas the other already achieves its definition as a result of the critical attention it receives. Indo-English criticism fails to make the necessary discriminations and so there is confusion instead of clarity.

I am particularly upset by the use of the word major. I remember an occasion when I was discussing a new book of poems with a group of Indo-English poets one of whom said casually "Oh, he is not a major poet." And the rest agreed. When I suggested that none of us was major, the others in the group took it to mean that I was denying them the title while appropriating it for myself. One of them sarcastically commented: "Except you, of course." When I protested, they said "Don't be modest." The point of this story is that as a class we Indo-English poets have lost our bearings, we don't know what we have achieved and what we have not achieved, and so we fail to get there because we imagine we are already there.

THE anthologies of Indo-English poetry published so far emphasise this totally unreal situation. There is, for example, *A Golden Treasury of Indo-Anglian Poetry* published by the Sahitya Akademi which I have called The Golden Wastepaper Basket. It had sold seven copies in two years when last reports came in. A lengthy introduction surveys the desert and finds it blooming with hundreds of flowers and rarest gems serene. The editor gazes hard at the ridiculous and pronounces it sublime.

Another anthology, a gigantic one, is the most permissive collection ever made, apart from the fact that each poet represented makes a statement of his poetic credo and has his photograph to go with it and his poems. The extent of the permissiveness can be illustrated by something that happened to me.

As editor of *Poetry India* I accepted two excellent poems by a young Parsi lad in Bombay. I wrote to him and we met. He told me it was unlikely he would continue to write poetry and would not listen to my persuasive arguments that he undoubtedly had talent. I published the poems. The anthology I have mentioned took the poems from *Poetry India* without my permission. To put such poems at random into an anthology without inquiring into the poet's background, credentials and evidence of poetic output was typical of the irresponsibility and total absence of a critical conscience which is familiar to me in the Indo-English scene.

Two years ago I visited Srinagar for a seminar, and met a young man there who took me home and showed me two poems by an English poet in an anthology published by England's *Critical Quarterly*. These were the same poems which I had published in *Poetry India*, as written by my young Parsi student in Bombay. They are now swelling the ranks of the biggest Indo-English poetry anthology.

Once again, I must warn you that it will not do to say: Such things happen. My contention is that they do not happen by accident, that they should serve as eye-openers to the realities of the situation, just as publicly exposed cases of corruption point to the vast unexposed corruption in society; and that the habits of mind which they indicate, if not uprooted, lead to similar happenings all the time.

I said in the beginning that my self-appointed task is to see the Indo-English poet as he really is. Let me present a composite portrait, which is not perhaps wholly true of any one Indo-English poet but is partially true of all or at least of the majority. He has modestly and tentatively written a few poems in his college days of which he does not think highly because Indian university education has not yet destroyed his commonsense. His parents, uncles, maiden aunts and other relatives, friends, eminent professors and Physical Training Instructor encouraged him and called him a poet. He published some poems in the college magazine and sent others to various newspapers and periodicals. They were promptly published. A publisher of Indo-English poetry, who never misses a new star on the horizon, writes him a letter offering to publish a collection of his poems if he can pay for the printing. The money is raised.

One more Indo-English poet has arrived. Several others rush to welcome him. One calls him a major poet, another describes him as philosophical. In the meanwhile he has found a job or if he is a woman, a husband. Now the Indo-English poet complains that he doesn't get enough time to write but of course he writes all the same. Ten years later his career is well advanced or if he is a woman he has three children. A solitary critic in Bombay notices that this poet's poems written in college are his best. They were at least promising. Now, the later poems are without promise. The production too has declined. If you ask him for his new poems he sends you seventeen lines totalling 39 words divided into two poems entitled *Images*, *Image 1* and *Image 2*, published three years earlier in the *Western Railway Clerks Union Quarterly Bulletin*.

One day, another ten years later, he asks you to drink and dine with him and his family as he wants to show you some new poems. You go along, for the sake of the drinks and the dinner. He puts a sheaf of poems into your hands and says proudly. "These are by my sons". A bright-looking teen-ager smiles shyly at you. You ask him what he wants to become

when he grows up. He says he intends to go into advertising. What about poetry? That too, he replies, he intends to go into that too.

And he does. Saturday afternoon or Sunday morning, he snatches an hour or so and writes a poem. The same day he posts it to the newspaper or periodical which once published his work. It still does. Another generation of Indo-English poets is at work.

How can one take any poetry seriously which is the product of such circumstances, the enemies of poetry? The Indo-English poet, characteristically, is one who thinks he need not pay any price for being a poet, no suffering because his daily decisions are against the spirit of poetry, no conflicts between his job and poetry, no tension in his relations with others because of poetry, not even a quarrel with his wife for the sake of poetry. He does not enter the Valley of Darkness, so he has no glimpse of the Shining Mountain on the other side. He never experiences the Dark Night of the Soul, so he never knows the bliss of grace. Poetry is merely the agent of his self-image, not his goddess whose worship brings him anguish and joy.

A TRUE poet criticises himself so severely that the criticism of another pains him only a little and only in passing. A true poet knows that every compromise he makes affects his capacity to write poetry, and knowing this he lives tragically, which also means gayly, with his necessary compromises, and struggles to transcend them. The Indo-English poet lives in war-time as if there will be business as usual, whereas the true poet knows that it is always war-time for him, and business cannot be as usual.

To have everything else as well as poetry is the bourgeois dream. To give up everything for poetry is the bohemian practice. Between the two extremes lie infinite possibilities. The true poet is always a wanderer, if not physically then in the jungles of the heart, and those jungles are full of real, not fanciful, wild animals whose faces do not resemble the placid faces of professors. The true poet has to observe the beasts as well as to run for his life when they observe him. Poetry is either a matter of life and death for him or it is nothin.

The problems of language, of Indianness, and any others that are relevant can be solved creatively if the basic question of what it means to be a poet is faced in the first instance. I may be told that the same question faces writing in the Indian languages. I don't worry about *them*. My concern, and yours in this Seminar, is with the Indo-English poet and his critics, who should be pointing a finger at themselves and not at others.

My last words on this subject for the present: In the first quarter of the nineteenth century, poetry was written by Indians in English for the

first time. That was the beginning. In the middle of the nineteenth century, and again in the last quarter, its weaknesses were explained by the fact that it was only the beginning. Upto the first world war and during it, was yet another beginning. The next beginning lasted till the end of the second world war. From Independence till 1970, Indo-English poetry was again forgiven for a lot of sins because it was only beginning. Now in the seventies we are being encouraged and patronised since we are just beginning. Thus the history of Indo-English poetry is a perpetual beginning and never achieves the stage of maturity. I think the time for that is overdue.

REVIEWS

1. PERFECTION . . . BUT

IT was a treat, and, like all unexpected ones, the sweeter. When K. nonchalantly produced two tickets for the Igor Oistrakh recital at the Bhabha Auditorium (arranged under the auspices of the National Centre for Performing Arts, with the courtesy of the ICCR), I jumped for joy, quickly got into my sole little black dress and pearls, scrubbed my daughter's smudgy nose clean and off we went. Trekked, bused and at last even taxied to get there on time. The first site of the Auditorium full of glittering gathering of ladies in their much nicer black dresses and pearls (or the equivalents of it) inspired awe. Everyone was there in their best, gathered to listen to who everyone says is the best violinist in the world. I was a hick, knowing nothing about Western classical music, except what pleases my ear and what not. But even I knew that Oistrakh is a big NAME. And I have a battered scratched and old Lp., acquired in my salad days, of David, the father, which I adore. It is the usual Mendelssohn and Tchaikovsky showpieces and ham right through, but I love it. I was entirely prepared to accord the son as much love and reverence as the father.

The programme I borrowed distressed me. There was only the one Mozart (than whom I love none better) and one Greig, whom I had heard, but rather sparingly. Then came a string of Unheards. I mean I am innocent of the latest in music, so I cannot say if they were all famous or not. They had difficult names. I was surprised by the maestro. He is young—not even forty I am sure. He is a chunkily built, impassive man, his face a sort of a pleasant cross between Jack Lemmon at his most lugubrious and President Nixon at his most expansive. What was impressive was the utter lack of flourish and ostentation. This I have noticed in all the great artists. They enter, bow perfunctorily to admiring applause and get down to business right away. There is no question of establishing rapport, no especial desire to play to the audience. The rapport and the union is between the artist and the music. You feel as though

you are an incidental, almost accidental witness to the encounter between two geniuses. Oistrakh's attitude was the same. Not exactly an indifference, but an unawareness of all of us gathered there to listen to him and admire him excessively, because of his reputation, because of his performance, and above all, because of this extraordinary honour he was conferring upon us by actually condescending to play to us from his eminence. The audience who seldom gets a chance of hearing the really top-notchers in a live performance was plainly agog.

The Mozart was of course beautiful. It goes without saying. The really spirited dialogue between the fiddle and the piano (Igor Tchernikhov) proved how successfully the two had grasped every nuance not only of the work at hand but of each other's mood and movement. The Greig was played by Oistrakh with more feeling than the Mozart, and it was surprisingly lighthearted, especially the dance towards the end, to which my daughter tapped with her foot and was frowned into silence by the lady on the left. During the interval some one must have hinted on behalf of us poor people that this audience was more likely to appreciate the old familiar faces, so instead of the announced programme, Oistrakh played Tchaikovsky's "Meditation" and Kachaturian, a dance. Both were delightful, especially Kachaturian who alternated his moods in quick succession, almost from phrase to phrase. The earlier Tartini too, was in a twinkling mood. On the whole, the evening would have been all dance and sparkle, were it not for the encores and the Paganini. I have nothing to say about the Paganini at all, except that I found my mind wandering during it to various curious hairdos and royal blue velvet suits with wide lapels. It was a shock to hear the first encore, Schubert's Ave Maria. I thought that sort of thing must have gone out with the revolution, but there you are. It was played with great seriousness, though of course not fervour, and the smile with which he announced it, and heard our delighted murmur was the only indication of his feeling. Schumann, too, is generally a favourite of mine and I found him pleasing.

What more is there to say? Only this. That as long as the old man with his heart as big as a mountain is still alive, his son has hardly a chance to be the greatest violinist in the world. Though I cannot say that the fiddle is my favourite instrument (I agree with Shaw there), Oistrakh Senior can evoke such a depth of response from me as to make my skin stand out in goose-flesh. The son is certainly competent to the degree of being perfect. He has all the mastery needed to be the greatest. He has not the heart. And what is music if it is not going to appeal to your heart from its heart?

—Gauri Deshpande

2. REAL CRITICISM AT LAST

INDIAN writing in English has not been well-served by its critics. Both Indians and foreigners have too often been willing to subscribe to a double standard, suggesting that it is not fair to apply 'strict international standards of literacy criticism' to writers using a language other than their mother tongue. Such a condescending attitude can contribute nothing to the evaluation of Indian writing or to the establishment of critical standards.

Meenakshi Mukherjee has been one of the outstanding exceptions to this trend. Her perceptive reviews of individual books have been appearing in a number of journals over the past few years. Her work is consistently distinguished by a clear sense of the structure of a literary work and by the absence of the tone of personal pique which sometimes mars Indian criticism.

It is, of course, one thing to write an individual review and another to value a body of literature. But Mukherjee has succeeded in this far more demanding task. *The Twice-Born Fiction*¹ is a study of the themes and techniques of the major Indian novels in English written between 1930 and 1964. The basic point of view informing the book is that theme cannot be considered apart from technique. Two novels dealing with what superficially seems to be the same theme may turn out on closer examination to have little in common. Mukherjee makes this point very well in her comparison of two of the best known novels dealing with the freedom movement, Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and R. K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma*. Raja Rao's story is told from the point of view of an old illiterate village woman who is only a minor participant in the story. Thus the story is basically about the impact of the Gandhian movement on the village of Kanthapura. In *Waiting for the Mahatma* the story is told from the point of view of Sriram, the chief character, but the author preserves some distance between himself and his hero. As a result, the story becomes an ironic picture of the development of Sriram under the influence of Gandhism.

The identity of theme and structure has become a cliché in modern literacy criticism. Stating the principle is easy, but actually using it as a critical tool is infinitely harder. Mukherjee has managed to do this, however. In case after case she has used this tool to pinpoint the weakness of a novel. Pointing out a structural weakness in Mulk Raj Anand's *The Sword and the Sickle* she says: "It is this confusion of point of view that prevents Lalu from becoming a sharply defined objective character."

¹ *The Twice-born Fiction*, Meenakshi Mukherjee, Heinemann, New Delhi, 1971. Pp. 239.

Similarly, she points out, Nayantara Sahgal's *A Time To Be Happy* is weakened by a confusion in point of focus. In both cases, the narrator who has been uninvolved in the action suddenly gets emotionally involved in a way that upsets the total design of the novel.

In Mukherjee's view, not only must a novel have unity of theme and structure; it must be clearly localized in time and space. The most successful writers like R. K. Narayan and Raja Rao succeed in conveying a universal vision because they deal with concrete, clearly localized experience. Much Indo-Anglian fiction, she argues, remains unauthentic because its locale is vaguely 'Indian' without being pinpointed in time and space. This results in a "vague romanticism", as in Kamala Markandaya's *Some Inner Fury*, or in a weak attempt at universality. The future of the Indo-Anglian novel, Mukherjee believes, is "in the direction of further authenticity through exploiting the particular, local, and regional reality".

Mukherjee's statement of critical principles and her structural analyses of various novels are excellent. Her discussion of the themes *per se*—especially that of the East-West encounter—is less satisfactory. She begins by saying, quite rightly, that since an educated Indian is a product of two cultures, Indian and Western, the intercultural nature of his being is one of the dominant themes of the Indo-Anglian writer. But then she goes on to try to characterize the value conflicts between East and West in terms of differing views of man's relation to nature, time and other men. These abstractions may be of use to social scientists concerned with broadly characterizing cultures, but they are too simple and general to throw much light on the value conflicts of an educated Indian. After introducing these metaphysical questions the writer herself does not seem to know what to do with them and she refers to them only sporadically and half-heartedly.

When the discussion of the East-West theme in specific novels is taken up the argument is hard to follow because the writers in question are not all dealing with the same problems. In some cases the basic problem is personal fulfilment as opposed to loyalty to the family. In others it is a sense of alienation from the common people of the country. This discussion would have perhaps gained coherence and clarity if particular conflicts had been analysed in greater depth. She concludes her discussion of several novels with a perceptive observation, one that deserved more detailed treatment:

... in every one of these novels the East finally wins. This triumph of Indian values does not emerge naturally out of the situation depicted, but is often quite arbitrary. One strongly suspects that this is so because the novelists themselves, like their protagonists, feel alienated from these values and they therefore tend to sentimentalize and idealize them.

A chapter is devoted to a very interesting discussion of the Indo-Anglian writer's stylistic problem. The basic problem, as she sees it, is conveying in English "modes of thinking, manners of observation, and instinctive responses of a people whose awareness has been conditioned by a language other than English". A number of writers, she points out, have consciously experimented with their use of English to convey Indian modes of expression. Some, like Mulk Raj Anand, have experimented with diction, literally translating idioms. Mukherjee cites several examples from Anand: "eating the dust of the roadway", "drinking the blood of my liver", "a potter of somewhere". Several writers have used literal translation to coin new compounds. Raja Rao refers to the "that house people" and "the next-house women's kitchen". Bhabani Bhattacharya speaks of a "milk-infant".

If one grants the basic problem, these are perhaps legitimate solutions. But it is possible to overstate the problem itself. As Mukherjee points out, one of the most successful Indo-Anglian writers is R. K. Narayan who makes no attempt to "Indianize" his diction:

Narayan never deliberately attempts to be Indian, but because he deals with convincing human beings in authentic situations, and records their responses honestly, and because these human beings happen to be Indians, he succeeds in achieving that difficult task: writing in a genuinely Indian way without being self-conscious about it.

In evaluating diction and style the same criterion is used that has been consistently applied throughout the book: is it an integral part of the novelist's vision? By this criterion the work of most writers other than Narayan is found to be characterized by a "meretricious, ornate, and adjective-ridden style, and an excess of solemnity."

Mukherjee concludes by saying that Indo-Anglian fiction is flourishing today as never before. More novels are being written and new themes are being explored. To continue to develop Indo-Anglian fiction requires capable, uncondescending criticism. The volume is already a substantial contribution and gives every indication that still more can be expected of her.

—Maxine Berntsen

3. RECENT FICTION*

A YOUNG friend recently commented on the state of vacuum that exists in the Indian literary scene which makes it difficult to judge the quality of a writer's talent. The comment is not entirely justified. The quality of a novel depends a great deal on the universality of its theme, on how easily one can identify with the characters and its readability. The three books reviewed here deserve attention on all three counts.

Both of Arun Joshi's novels explore the feeling of alienation in a young man. *The foreigner* is the story of Sindi Oberoi who is an Indian brought up in Kenya. Orphaned at an early age, looked after by an uncle, he grows up and pursues his higher studies in London, and finally in the U.S.A. Wherever he is he goes through the motions of living, feeling totally unrelated to his surroundings. A couple of love affairs in England which end unhappily, accentuate this feeling. Finally, in Boston, he meets June Blyth and falls in love with her. June's love for Sindi wants all the conventional happy endings: marriage and children. Her greatest fulfilment is in being needed. Their affair is doomed from the beginning, their mutual needs being so disparate. The dissolution of an affair is a sad but commonplace event, in this case it takes a tragic twist, with the appearance of Babu Khemka, who comes to Boston from India to study. Babu is an ingenuous young man, filled with child-like wonder of life in America, a non-achiever, needing to depend on some one. Babu, on his arrival in Boston, quickly becomes the responsibility of Sindi. It is through Sindi that he meets June and is smitten with her. June responds to this devotion in contrast to Sindi's reserve. She gets engaged to Babu, while still continuing to long for Sindi. When Babu discovers the nature of June's relationship to Sindi, he drives off in rage and dies in an accident. Later Sindi learns that June is carrying Babu's child. But she, too, dies during an attempted abortion. Sindi returns to India burdened with the guilt of these two deaths. In India he gets a job with Babu's father, a big industrialist, and develops a kind of intimacy with Shiela, Babu's sister. While working for Mr. Khemka, Sindi finds out that the whole business is crooked. Mr. Khemka is eventually arrested for tax evasion, and Sindi decides to leave. The business is about to fold up, leaving the poor employees in the lurch. Sindi is persuaded by them to take charge of affairs and keep the concern going. For the first time

* *The Foreigner*: Arun Joshi, Hind Pocket Books, New Delhi, 1972 Rs. 5.00; *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*: Arun Joshi, Hind Pocket Books, New Delhi, 1971, Rs. 5.00; *The Adventuress*: Santha Rama Rau, Hind Pocket Books, New Delhi, 1973, Rs. 6.00.

Sindi finds it within himself to respond to the needs of others, against his own inclination.

The story swings between Sindi's past in America and his present life in New Delhi. The development of Sindi's character through his various traumatic experiences is done with great skill and feeling. Somewhere in the middle of the story Sindi's outlook in life is summed up in a conversation he has with June, "... I was afraid of possessing anybody and I was afraid of being possessed, and marriage meant both." And then again "... Nothing ever seems real to me, leave alone permanent. Nothing seems to be very important." He is constantly trying to insulate himself from pain which comes with involvement and parting. And there is always parting, there is always death. It was June's death which made him see that "Detachment consisted of right action and not escape from it." And it was the first hand acquaintance with the wretched, helpless poverty of his colleagues which leads him to the final acceptance: "Sometimes detachment lies in actually getting involved." The unfolding of the character is consistent, and the development not unbelievable, nor unreasonable. However, like in many novels written in the first person, the author at times tends to get too involved with his hero and appears to be exorcising his own ghosts. Sindi's conflicts and the specially appropriate solution he finds will appeal to most of us who have sometimes wondered about the relevance of life.

IN *The strange case of Billy Biswas*, this same theme of alienation is created differently. This time the story is narrated in the third person, by a friend of the hero. Billy Biswas is rich, educated abroad, belonging to an upper class family. He is disturbed by the meaninglessness of his conventional life. In a futile attempt to escape from his feeling of unfulfilment, he marries an attractive woman from a similar background, mistaking her smartness for intelligence and understanding. The marriage further embitters him and gives him a sickening insight into the commonplace hypocrisies of society and family life. During an anthropological trip to the jungles of Madhya Pradesh, he vanishes. Years later he is discovered, living with Bilasia, a tribal woman who has brought him peace and happiness. His father and wife hearing of his whereabouts contrive to have him brought back. The effort ends in tragedy, Billy Biswas is killed by a police bullet.

Renunciation of a secure, coveted life is always intriguing. The motivations and the events leading to such an act are portrayed in this novel very sensitively. The whole story is told by the friend who has pieced it together. Compared to Sindi, Billy is a more likeable character. One can understand and relate to his unhappiness more easily. He is warm and loveable where Sindi was distant and elusive. Billy acts in time to prevent the complete corruption of his self by circumstances.

There is a continuity and progress in Arun Joshi's writing as exhibited by these two novels which make one look forward to his next work. He talks of mystical experiences (which he calls hallucinations) that seem to be a force beyond one's control and that shape one's life. We have only a glimpse of these in the first novel, but in the latter book the influence of mysticism is worked out in greater detail. In both books violent deaths feature as important catalysts and emphasize the points of the stories or take them forward with a leap. Compared to the interesting complex men, however, the novelist does not portray women forcefully enough. One only gets a hint of June's anguish or Bilasia's magnetism. There is an ambivalence here that may prove to be a major weakness if not remedied. The technique of moving the story from the past to the present and back to the past is used dextrously and the contrasts thus created succeed in gripping the reader's imagination through the entire narration. A pleasant aspect of Arun Joshi's writing is that he does not self-consciously set out to create local or 'Indian' colour. But in probing the intricacies of the structure of people, the setting, whether a beach picnic in the U.S.A., a banal party in New Delhi's smart set or the grand but desolate ruins in the forests of M.P. is vivid and authentic, and lends an extra air of verisimilitude not only to atmosphere, but also to character.

SANTA Rama Rau's *The Adventuress*, in not too different a category, is very good reading too. Kay, the heroine, finds herself a Stateless individual in post-war Tokyo. A Philippino, without any papers to prove her status, she is likely to be caught as a collaborator by the Americans, and to escape that fate she weaves about herself a large screen of lies and subterfuges. When she meets an American Army officer, Charles Beaver, and falls in love with him, she is forced to continue to practice further deceit to satisfy his curiosity about herself. He offers to divorce his wife and marry her, but upon finding out that she has been much less than truthful, his fervour subsides and he drops her. Kay then manages to wangle an entry visa to the Philippines. There she gets a job as a social secretary in the International Club. In the Club she meets Jeremy Wilson, a pilot on the Shanghai run. She persuades him to marry her and confer upon her his nationality. She promises to divorce him and set him free once they reach Shanghai. There she meets David Marius, an intriguing character, involved in smuggling, among other things. He wants Wilson to work for him. He helps Kay get her divorce, which requires him to be cited as a co-respondent. Afterwards she teams up with him, about to wind up business in China before the Revolution and escape to Hong Kong. Kay is an interesting character, also one likely to engage our sympathies. Her philosophy in life is "survival is the first love and the last battle". She has subtle nuances

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4. CRIES AND WHISPERS

INGMAR BERGMAN's past films have been a cinematic interpretation of his theological seekings: they are concerned with God and man, the paradox and the mystery of the relationship. Of late though he has been working in the somewhat smaller area of humanism, with people rather than metaphysical concepts, and more especially women. This is evident in his recent "Cries and Whispers".

In a beautiful manor house at the end of the last century, four women live together for one languishing summer. The two married sisters Karin (Ingrid Thulin) and Maria (Liv Ullmann) are tending a younger sister, Agnes (Harriet Andersson), who has but a handful of days to live, and whose dying is marked by horrific bouts of coughing and a tearing pain that seems to spring from bottomless depths of her body. She is bearing an unbearable pain, and her ebbing sets the tempo of the others' lives: a tightrope of tension stretches across their nerves, ropes through the spacious rooms, laces the sisters in a tenuous bond. Anna, the buxom maid servant (Kari Sylwan) hovers around the sickbed like a great heavy bird in perpetual motion. She is unceasingly solicitous. Should she change the linen? Does the girl want a drink of water? She is the only one who really cares for Agnes, with a placid love she neither wants to nor knows how to hide. Anna would like to think that plumping the pillows would somehow ease the febrile breath that seems to filter through a net of thorns.

Red is the predominant colour in the house, a dark fecund red that seeps through the walls, the carpets, it is an ominous red, like a still wet blood stain. It is the hush red of a pomegranate or an old tapestry. But white is the motif of relief, it soothes, like the Bach in the background. Karin and Maria dress in elegantly flowing white, there is a suggestion of silk, a hint of lace. Nurse and patient sit attired in white, one in hope, the other by turns in patient composure and impatient despair.

Time seems as if in slow motion, or in a dream sequence. Movements, hushed voices, the women floating from room to room, form a finely choreographed ballet; the camera moves luminously over formalized period settings; faces, figures, caught in classic attitudes seem as in an old, not quite forgotten picture. The hours move relentlessly on and yet not at all; a frozen surface that captures them in a cameo, as atrophied life in the centre of a water agate.

Agnes' diary gives glimpses of a younger time, glossed over by distance, when rivalries and conflicts marked the area between the sisters. Even now Karin is cold, insouciant, her handsome features unblurred by the softness of love. She has forgotten how to reach out, to touch another human being, or perhaps has put it behind her as an unfitting

feeling. Maria draws on her tactile arts to provoke a semblance of response ; she craves, in as far as her shallow heart will allow, that they be friends, or at least sisters in the merest sense. But Maria too, is not made for friendship ; her selfishness and open sensuality are flimsy doors to hide behind. Both married to unsubstantial men, their restlessness is un-channelled and dangerous.

Watching the film is like going backwards through a photograph album belonging to a stranger ; one tends by turns to identify and not understand. Scenes come back with a chilling clarity : Anna, her blouse unbuttoned, holding Agnes to her breast, crooning in the age-old way, with the look of an enraptured madonna ; Raphael might have caught them on canvas in one of the most classic poses of all time ; indeed Anna has a biblical fervour : Agnes, dead, sitting up and reaching out to a terrified Maria : Karin, smashing a glass on the floor and cutting up her legs as an ultimate gesture of irony to her husband, walking to him smiling in a white silk night dress.

And Agnes ; even the name seems to resound with an uneluctable sense of tragedy. As her life, her youth, diminishes with every breath she clings to, as she dies in small but sure measures, she seems to give a final treatise on death. Only a Bergman actress can die like that.

"Cries and Whispers" is a psychological danse macabre, a film on the fine edge of feeling ; it is a symbiosis of frailness and frigidity. It is, in Bergman terms, a hue perhaps of a greater verity.

Nusrat Tayabali

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in herself, which the author has revealed through the detail of a gesture, the hint of a mood. Kay gives generously of herself to those whom she might be said to have 'used' in her fight to survive. A sense of style allows her to square off her debts to men elegantly. Besides being successful in creating this attractive character, Santa Rama Rau has vividly brought to life the locales in Tokyo, Manila, Shanghai. She has painted them authentically with the minimum of detail necessary. The contrasting life-styles in the various places which are the battlefields in Kay's fight for survival are used skilfully to suggest her tough durability and resilience. This is a very readable book. Though not as profoundly and overtly stated as in Joshi's novels the content is essentially the same : a character's development in response to the predatory, even fatal forays made upon it by society and life.

N. B.

LETTERS

Dear Sir,

Though I don't agree with Gauri Deshpande entirely, there is a lot of truth in what she says. There can be no doubt that poetry is 'about the poet' or his feelings. But then quite a lot of writing that passes as prose, would by her definition be poetry. Her own essay: "What? Poetry!", frankly, gave a lot of pleasure, but it told me more about her feelings about poetry than about poetry itself! So according to her definition, it should be considered poetry!

I maintain that the form is important in distinguishing poetry from prose; the rhyme, the rhythm, etc. Of course, I know there can be jangles with perfect rhyme and rhythm, but for good poetry, 'the subjective and strong feeling' plus a suitable, beautiful form are necessary.

I would like the writer to consider the following point: Literature, both as a trade and as an art, requires an audience. In the final analysis it is the audience that decides what is literature and what not. What generation after generation of people find *beautiful* is great literature. I am not talking about 'popularity'. Comics and penny dreadfuls may be very popular, but no one really finds them beautiful. They may be read for excitement, for some sensationalism, for escape from a drab existence, but they are not preserved, they are not read, re-read, generation after generation.

I once gave a list of sentences to children, and asked them to arrange them in their order of beauty—beginning with the most beautiful. In the list I included some sentences from good poetry, some sentences that were a paraphrase of these, and some other ordinary sentences. The children almost invariably chose 'literature'. If Gauri Deshpande tries this with her own example; and a reasonable paraphrase of it, every one will prefer "My love is like a red, red rose that's newly sprung in June" to "My love is as sweet and fresh as the first June rose". And I maintain that (especially in the case of Burns) a lot of the instantaneous appeal of the "feeling" is in a great degree due to the unique and beautiful arrangement of words. "The poet acts as a lens" no doubt, but the "order" of the words, the music, polishes and brightens the lens.

True, "if the poet's sensibilities were taken away from a poem it would not remain a poem", but we cannot perceive the sensibilities unless the poet uses the right words in the right order to convey them.

Jai Godrej

The third essay in this series (Spring, 1974) will be about form.—Ed.

Dear Sir,

I would like to comment on Nita Sanghvi's review of the Poster Poems exhibition organised jointly by Urmila Rao (design) and myself (words). There can be no valid objection to the statement that the exhibition failed to impress the critic or that the verbal and visual creations did not blend. What I'm sure is objectionable, in a literary journal, is the critic's total inability to grasp the nature of the literary. She quotes a poem and calls it cynical, as if that is enough to condemn it, no matter how well written. Surely it is the quality of the cynicism that counts, particularly if the poet is speaking through a persona. The hodge-podge influences on a typical modern mind, depicted in my poem, are interpreted by the critic as a reflection on me!

Similarly, the poems in my *Neutral* series, obviously satirising a particular mode of remaining apart from one's own involvements, are quoted *against* me, to illustrate my alleged deficiencies as man and "intellectual". I am accused of being "typical of too many of our intellectuals who make too much of the routine pointlessness of existence". In my poems, I of course satirise those who do, but then Sanghvi misses the point of the argument.

If that were all, I would leave the critic to stew in her own ignorance. But she goes on to pontificate about the echoing of nihilistic philosophy which, according to her, appears unauthentic coming from Indians. What major upheavals have we faced? she asks innocently. I wonder what kind of parochial world Nita Sanghvi lives in. If she has seen nothing and heard nothing about the upheavals around her, one can only pity her. But that blindness and deafness hardly qualify her to criticise contemporary poetry.

The review gets worse intellectually as it proceeds. "And why is it," Sanghvi asks, "that people who complain so much are always those who have access to all the art and entertainment and other activities which excite the mind?" Here's a lovely argument, which should help us to put in its proper place, as mere complaining, most of the world's literature and art. Its producers were not, alas, satisfied with the access they had to entertainment and other activities. They had the temerity to look hard at life and to say many terrifying things about it. Nita Sanghvi has the remedy. All that is needed is "the capacity to stand by the sea, open the windows of one's self and say 'it's lovely to be alive'."

Nissim Ezekiel

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